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## Leaks at Louisiana oil refineries spew unreported tons of pollutants

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WASHINGTON — Leaking pipes and valves at Louisiana's oil refineries release an estimated 12.7 million pounds of smog-causing organic compounds into the atmosphere each year, much of it previously unreported, according to a congressional report released this week.

That's the equivalent of emissions generated by more than 700,000 new cars, according to the report by the House Government Reform Committee's Democratic staff. The staffers relied on previously unreleased data from the Environmental Protection Agency.

Most of these emissions are a result of leaking valves that can be repaired with a simple turn of a wrench, the report said.

"The bad news is the Clean Air Act is being violated, and Americans are being exposed to tremendous amounts of harmful air pollution," said Rep. Harry Waxman, D-Calif., the panel's top Democrat. "The good news is the problem can be solved. All that's needed is a good wrench."

The pollutants are emitted as a result of leaks and often are referred to as "fugitive emissions."

An industry trade group denied that operators of refineries are guilty of large-scale violations of the Clean Air Act.

"A large refinery spends well in excess of a million dollars per year complying with the many regulations governing fugitive emissions," the American Petroleum Institute said. "For many years, the indus-

try has been working proactively, often in conjunction with the EPA, to improve equipment and methods for detection and control of fugitive emissions."

Texas, Louisiana and California, the states with the nation's largest number of refineries, are the source of more than two-thirds of the 80 million pounds of volatile organic compounds released annually across the United States, according to the congressional report. As of 1998, there were 164 refineries operating in the United States, including 27 in Texas, 24 in California and 20 in Louisiana.

In its examination of refineries,

the staff said that EPA investigators who studied fugitive emissions at 17 refineries across the country found that the pollution averaged two to four times what the plants were reporting under the 1990 Clean Air Act.

The pollution includes volatile organic compounds from petroleum, such as benzene, methyl ethyl ketone, and toluene, all of which have been linked to various health problems.

An EPA official said Thursday that the emissions are being investigated, and that enforcement action is likely to come in the next six months.